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LETTER DATED 14 OCTOBER 1996 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to developments in eastern Zaire, and especially in South Kivu Province, where the situation has been deteriorating to an alarming degree during recent weeks.

New tensions have arisen in the Uvira, Mwanga and Fizi districts of South Kivu Province which for several generations have been home to about 350,000 people known as the Banyamulenge. They speak the language of Rwanda and include both Hutus and Tutsis, though the majority are Tutsis. They were already settled in this area when Zaire became independent in 1960. In 1972, like all persons living within Zaire's borders, they were granted Zairean nationality. A nationality law of 1981 subsequently withdrew this status from them but the law was not enforced until the early months of 1996. There has since been pressure on the Banyamulenge to leave Zaire and move to Rwanda. Their situation is thus similar to that of the Masisi people in North Kivu whose plight has previously attracted the Council's concern.

Hostilities have now broken out in the area inhabited by the Banyamulenge, which has been declared a military zone. Since the first half of September the Zairean Armed Forces have launched an offensive against armed Tutsi groups there and this has allegedly led to attacks on Banyamulenge civilians. It is equally alleged that armed Tutsi groups have attacked civilian targets. As a result tension has increased on the border between Rwanda and Zaire, including cross-border exchanges of heavy weapons fire and mutual accusations between the two Governments.

On 13 September 1996, Zaire accused the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of providing logistical support to armed Banyamulenge groups infiltrating Zaire from Rwanda and Burundi. It also accused UNHCR of having repatriated to Rwanda in 1994-1995 about 3,000 young Banyamulenge, who were later trained by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). Given the seriousness of these allegations, on 21 September 1996 I dispatched Assistant Secretary-General Ibrahima Fall to Kinshasa as my Special Envoy, with a letter that I had written to Prime Minister Kengo wa Dondo. Following discussions with my Special Envoy, the Government of Zaire agreed that UNHCR had not in fact been involved in the alleged activities.

Meanwhile, violence in the area has continued to grow. On 6 October, armed persons, alleged to be Banyamulenge, attacked the hospital at Lemera (mid-way between Bukavu and Uvira) and reportedly killed 34 patients, 4 male nurses and 2 doctors. They also killed 2 priests and 12 other people in Kidore Catholic Church.

On 10 October 1996, I issued a statement in which I called on the parties to do everything in their power to keep the situation calm while solutions were being sought for both the immediate and the underlying problems. On the same day, however, I learned with concern that General Eluki Monga-a-Ondo, the Chief of Staff of the Zairean Armed Forces, had again accused UNHCR of involvement in what he described as "an aggression against Zaire". The next day, I issued a further statement, in which I expressed concern over the deteriorating situation and the fighting between the Zairean Armed Forces and groups of Banyamulenge. I recalled the positive results of my Special Envoy's mission and urged the Zairean authorities to withdraw their allegations, which could pose a grave threat to the security of United Nations staff in the area.

During the night of 12-13 October, the refugee camp of Runingo on the Ruzizi Plain, with a population of approximately 15,000 Hutu refugees from Burundi and Rwanda, was attacked by assailants who were reportedly Banyamulenge. Four refugees were killed and six were wounded. According to the Zairean Refugee Camp Security Contingent (ZCSC) sources, an estimated 200-300 Banyamulenge allegedly crossed the Ruzizi river from Burundi, attacked the camp and then moved to the hills behind Uvira. The population of the site fled to nearby camps in fear of further attacks. The ZCSC provided reinforcements to protect the camp on the night of 13 October, and the refugees have now returned to the site.

Meanwhile, this growth in violence is having a damaging impact on the ability of humanitarian agencies to pursue their work in this needy area. Internationally recruited staff have had to be temporarily withdrawn to more secure locations and the United Nations system is preparing contingency plans for a potential humanitarian crisis. On 7 October the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees proposed a comprehensive approach to overcome the present stalemate in addressing the problem of refugees in the Great Lakes region as a whole. Her proposal has been discussed with high-level representatives from affected countries who attended the annual meeting of the UNHCR Executive Committee last week. It received widespread support there and it is now being discussed in the capitals concerned. UNHCR eagerly awaits the outcome of these discussions.

I have come to the conclusion that this deteriorating situation requires me to offer my good offices to assist the Government of Zaire in addressing the political and security aspects of the problems in the eastern part of the country, not only because of the threat they present to peace and the security in the region but also because they could have a negative impact on the efforts already launched by the United Nations, at that Government's request, to provide assistance to the elections planned for 1997. I have accordingly asked Assistant Secretary-General Fall to return to Zaire in the coming days and, after consulting the Government of Zaire, to report to me on action which the United Nations could usefully take.

I shall report further to the Security Council after receiving Mr. Fall's report.

I should be grateful if you would bring this information to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI